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**Gym Class Isn’t Just Fun and Games Anymore**

**By**[MOTOKO RICH](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/r/motoko_rich/index.html)

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — On a recent afternoon, the third graders in Sharon Patelsky’s class reviewed words like “acronym,” “clockwise” and “descending,” as well as math concepts like greater than, less than and place values.

During gym class.

Ms. Patelsky, the physical education teacher at Everglades Elementary School here, instructed the students to count by fours as they touched their elbows to their knees during a warm-up. They added up dots on pairs of dice before sprinting to round mats imprinted with mathematical symbols. And while in push-up position, they balanced on one arm and used the other (“Alternate!” Ms. Patelsky urged. “That’s one of your vocabulary words”) to stack oversize Lego blocks in columns labeled “ones,” “tens” and “hundreds.”

“I don’t work for Parks and Recreation,” said Ms. Patelsky, explaining the unorthodox approach to what has traditionally been one of the few breaks from the academic routine during the school day. “I am a teacher first.”

Spurred by an intensifying focus on student test scores in math and English as well as a desire to incorporate more health and fitness information, more school districts are pushing physical education teachers to move beyond soccer, kickball and tennis to include reading, writing and arithmetic as well. New standards for English and math that have been adopted by 45 states and the District of Columbia recommend that teachers in a wide variety of subjects incorporate literacy instruction and bring more “informational text” into the curriculum. Many states have interpreted these standards to include physical education and have developed recommendations and curriculum for districts and teachers to incorporate literacy skills and informational text into gym classes.

But some parents say they object to the way testing is creeping into every corner of school life. And some educators worry that pushing academics into P.E. class could defeat its primary purpose.

While generations of bookish but clumsy children who feared being the last pick for the dodge ball team may welcome the injection of math and reading into gym class, the push is also motivated by a simple fight for survival by physical education departments.

As budget cuts force school officials to make choices between subjects, “it’s just a way to make P.E. teachers more of an asset to schools and seem as important” as teachers in core subjects like language arts, math and science, said Eric Stern, the administrator in charge of physical education for the Palm Beach County schools, the country’s 11th-largest school district. “We are taking away the typical stereotype of what P.E. used to be like.”

Across the country, P.E. teachers now post vocabulary lists on gym walls, ask students to test Newton’s Laws of Motion as they toss balls, and give quizzes on parts of the skeleton or food groups.

At Deep Creek Elementary School in Chesapeake, Va., children count in different languages during warm-up exercises and hop on letter mats to spell out words during gym class.

Chellie LaFayette, the physical education teacher at Roxhill Elementary in Seattle, used an iPad purchased with a federal grant to show her students pictures of the Iditarod sled dog race and maps of mountain ranges for which she had named routes on a climbing wall.

In some cases, homework and testing have accompanied the new gym content. Last year, the District of Columbia added 50 questions about health and physical education to its end-of-year standardized tests.

Not all parents are pleased with the changes. “I think there is such a thing as taking something too far,” said Kathleen Oropeza, co-founder of Fund Education Now, a nonprofit public education advocacy group in Florida. “If you’ve got children who are learning the joy of being a good goalie or learning that they want to participate as part of the team, why does that have to be overshadowed by the hard, high-stakes test environment?”

And at a time of increasing [childhood obesity](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/11/education/even-as-schools-battle-obesity-physical-education-is-sidelined.html?emc=eta1&amp;_r=0)and diminishing [recess time](http://www.cep-dc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=309), some educators want to keep the focus on physical activity. “I’m more concerned that we don’t have enough time to be in the gym,” said Anna Allanbrook, principal of the Brooklyn New School, an elementary school that does not incorporate academics into gym time.

With parents and students rebelling against what they see as an [excess of homework](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/16/education/16homework.html?_r=0), some say that gym class assignments add to the busywork. “I never really learned anything from doing those papers,” said Annie Beyer-Chafets, 16, a sophomore in Westchester County, N.Y., who recalls being asked to write an essay about a relative’s lifetime sport choices last year.

Physical education teachers say they are not simply transforming gym class into another period of test preparation.

Instead, they say, P.E. helps students learn about lifetime fitness habits and other subjects previously taught in health classes. Students study the muscular and respiratory systems, learn to use pedometers and calculate optimum heart rates.

“We want to get kids moving,” said Paige Metz, coordinator for health and physical education at the San Diego County Office of Education. “But we want to make sure there is meaning to the movement.”

At times, the meaning seems to overtake the movement. In Kristina Rodgers’s gym class at Indian Pines Elementary School in Lake Worth, Fla., students spent as much time pondering pictures of broccoli and blocks of cheese to stick into pockets on a food chart as they did hopping or running.

Ms. Rodgers said that during a 30-minute class, it would be difficult for the children to keep moving constantly, so she interspersed cognitive tasks with fast-paced drills.

At another station she had set up, students jumped, kicked and ran to a pile of small cones that they stacked as quickly as possible.

“It’s fun,” said Keyli Castellon, 9, breathing hard after sprinting. “Because you get to do different moves, and it’s learning.”

A growing body of research shows that physical activity can help improve cognitive function.

“Some children just learn better through more movement than they do sitting at a desk,” said Janis Andrews, chief academic officer in Palm Beach. “Some kids are going to have that ‘aha’ moment not in the classroom, but the light bulb is going to finally go on outside.”

At an outdoor pavilion at Manatee Elementary School in Lake Worth, Shawn Roney, a gym teacher, showed fifth graders how to make chip shots with child-size golf clubs. Then he turned a club upside down and moved his palm across the club head. “Math majors, what is this?” he asked. Several children piped up with the answer he sought: an angle.

Some parents say that given how much students need to learn in a limited time during the day, sprinkling a few academic lessons into gym class makes sense. “They get the opportunity to play during recess,” said Renee Kelleher, a mother of four whose twin boys are in fourth grade at Manatee. “This is still class.”